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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BERLIN 001554

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL MARR MOPS NATO GM AF

SUBJECT: BUNDESTAG RENEWS ISAF MANDATE, BUT REAL DEBATE ON AFGHANISTAN WILL ONLY COME AFTER THE CONFERENCE

Classified By: POLITICAL MINISTER COUNSELOR GEORGE GLASS. REASONS: 1.4 (B) AND (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The Bundestag extended the mandate for Bundeswehr participation in ISAF for an additional year with a broad majority on December 3. While most opposition Social Democrats (SPD) supported the extension of the mandate, which was largely a roll-over of the previous one, the party put down a marker that it would take a critical view of any government proposal to re-open the mandate and increase the troop ceiling after the January 28 Afghanistan Conference in London. Going forward, the government will be keen to keep as many SPD parliamentarians on board with the mandate as possible. The conventional wisdom is that a large defection of the SPD would make the longer-term sustainability of the Afghanistan deployment impossible in the face of recent public opinion polls that show that almost 70% favor immediate withdrawal of the Bundeswehr. Recent comments by CSU Chairman Horst Seehofer and FDP Defense Policy Spokeswoman Elke Hoff, expressing skepticism about the need or the desirability of a troop increase, show that it will also be difficult getting the coalition to rally around the idea. Our best argument in pushing the Germans to come to the right conclusion is to emphasize that we greatly appreciate their leadership role over the past six years in filling military and civilian requirements in the north and hope we can count on them continuing to do so. END SUMMARY.

BREAK-DOWN OF THE VOTE

¶2. (C) The Bundestag vote was 446 in favor of extension, 105 against, with 43 abstentions. The number of "no" votes and abstentions was only slightly higher than last year, when the vote was 442 for, 96 against, with 32 abstentions. Most opposition Social Democrats (SPD) joined the two government parties -- Chancellor Merkel's Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) and FM Westerwelle's Free Democratic Party (FDP) -- in supporting the extension. The government deliberately made as few modifications to the mandate as possible -- leaving the troop ceiling of 4,500 unchanged -- in order to make it difficult for the SPD to abandon its long-standing support for the Afghanistan deployment. The opposition to the mandate extension was concentrated as usual in the Left Party, whose entire caucus of 70 parliamentarians voted against it. The Greens split, as they have since Tornado reconnaissance aircraft were added to the mandate in 2007, with a little more than half choosing to abstain.

SPD SUPPORTS, BUT PUTS DOWN MARKER

¶3. (C) In seeking a simple roll-over of the mandate, the government announced it would only consider additional German contributions after the January 28 Afghanistan Conference in

London. CDU/CSU and FDP speakers argued that it made no sense to pledge new resources before the new Afghanistan benchmarks and strategy had been agreed or before the new Afghan government had made credible commitments to carry out needed reforms. The opposition criticized the government for "hiding behind" the conference in refusing to reveal any of its future plans for possible increases in troops, trainers and other resources. While the SPD supported the mandate roll-over, it made clear that it would take a critical view of any government proposal to re-open the mandate and increase the troop ceiling after conference.

SERIOUS DEBATE POSTPONED

¶4. (C) By taking this approach, the government has postponed the really serious debate on the way forward in Afghanistan until after the London Conference. Over the next two months, the government will be re-evaluating whether it should, in fact, seek a troop increase after the conference and if so, by how much. Last summer, under the previous Grand Coalition government, the state secretaries at both MFA and MOD had agreed on a significant increase in the troop ceiling to allow the Bundeswehr to deploy the additional troops necessary to deal with the growing insurgency, to accelerate the training of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and to implement COMISAF GEN McChrystal's "partnering" concept.

¶5. (C) In the meantime, the enthusiasm for McChrystal's new counterinsurgency strategy and the momentum in favor of a troop increase have completely dissipated with the renewed uncertainty caused by the flawed Afghan election, the

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controversial September 4 Kunduz air strike and the extended U.S. strategy review. The parliamentary inquiry into the Kunduz air strike, which could last into summer 2010, could prove to be a continuing damper, especially if additional negative revelations come to light. The opposition smells blood, believing that the Chancellery might have had a role in suppressing negative Bundeswehr reports about the air strike in the weeks before the September 27 Bundestag election. Defense Minister zu Guttenberg will also be called on to explain what new information led him to change his evaluation of the air strike, since his original claim on November 6 that the attack was "military appropriate" was supposedly based on a thorough review of the NATO investigatory report.

OVERRIDING PRIORITY: KEEPING THE SPD ON BOARD

¶6. (C) The single most important consideration for the government in considering a troop increase after the London Conference will be keeping as many SPD parliamentarians on board as possible. Therefore, we anticipate any troop increase will be more modest than originally considered this past summer (at best, on the order of 1,000 to 1,500 rather than 2,500) and dedicated to more politically palatable activities, like training, rather than combat. Any troop increase will only be acceptable in terms of enabling an overall comprehensive strategy that includes substantial increases in civilian assistance. It is not only the SPD that remains to be convinced about additional troops -- many in the FDP and CSU, including Defense Policy Spokeswoman Elke Hoff and CSU Chair Horst Seehofer, have publicly expressed their skepticism about whether it is necessary. Seehofer said this past weekend in a newspaper interview that he had "little sympathy" for a troop increase, asserting that it could only be justified in the context of a new "convincing concept." Hoff argues that the current 4,500 troop ceiling would be high enough if the Bundeswehr just reduced the unnecessary administrative staff it now has at RC-North HQ in Mazar-e Sharif.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) Our best argument in pushing the Germans to come to

the right conclusion on additional troops is to emphasize that we greatly appreciate their leadership role over the past six years in filling military and civilian requirements in the north and hope we can count on them continuing to do so. We should focus less on specific asks, which gives the impression we are taking responsibility for orchestrating the fulfillment of the region's requirements. We should keep the onus on the Germans for taking care of the north as a whole, pointing out that, absent a major restructuring of the current Bundeswehr presence, additional troops are likely needed to carry out their own overriding goal, i.e., accelerating success to allow for an early transition to Afghan authority. The Bundeswehr is already right up against the current troop ceiling of 4,500, with no additional headroom to spare.

MURPHY